

EU POLICIES TOWARDS THE YOUNG GENERATION

Recent years have seen big changes in youth policy at both the European and Member State levels. Youth involvement in politics has become a bigger issue, and politicians are coming around to recognizing the crucial role of our young people in building the knowledge-based economy of the future while bridging cultural divides across Europe. Coupled with this is a greater understanding of the fears and aspirations that drive the young generation of Europeans. This article explores these issues from the standpoint of the European Commission, an institution that is proud to be at the center of many wide-ranging policy initiatives in youth policy in Europe.

Ján Figel¹

¹ Member of the European Commission in charge of Education, Training, Culture and Multilingualism

Young people have always represented hope, vitality, and determination to take destiny into one's own hands. Young Europeans have always been the first to take advantage of the opportunities created by the EU's process of integration: the freedom to move around the whole continent; the freedom to settle abroad to study and work. On average, 62 percent of Europeans aged 15 to 24 assert that for them the European Union means the freedom of movement. Among young people in the ten new Member States this applies to three out of four young people.

Yet despite this dynamism, less than half of Europe's young feel that they are well-informed about what is going on in politics and current affairs. Only four out of ten young Europeans aged 15 to 19 feel satisfied with the way democracy works in the EU. In contrast, a clear majority of young people think they should play a bigger part in the development of the European Union. They consistently call for more possibilities and information on how best to participate at European level. On average, 55 percent of Europeans aged 15 to 24 would like a more important role for the European Union in five years' time. Among young people in the ten new Member States this applies to two out of three young people.

Clearly, policy makers everywhere must work to address these concerns.

Europe is at a turning point politically and economically. Now more than ever we need the energy and imagination of Europe's youth to shape our future. This is why the European Commission has been, for many years, engaged in an intense dialogue with Europe's youth.

A New Approach to Youth Policy

In 2001, the EU Commission decided to develop a framework of co-operation in the field of youth in response to the challenges of socio-economic and demographic change facing European societies. In November 2001, after an intensive Europe-wide consultation involving several thousands of young people, youth NGOs, youth researchers and youth authorities, the Commission published the **White Paper on Youth**. Titled "A new impetus for European Youth", the White Paper is a key document and has laid the foundations of much of European Youth policy today.

The White Paper proposed that the Member States focus on cooperation in four priority areas: '*participation*', '*information*', '*voluntary activities*' and '*better understanding and knowledge of youth*'.

These priorities were subsequently adopted by the Council of Ministers in June 2002, instituting a **Framework for European cooperation in the field of youth**. It consists of two strands, discussed in the following sections.

Member States and Commission Working Together for Europe's Youth

EU institutions have only limited powers in the field of youth policy. Under the Treaty, EU institutions can only support, reinforce and coordinate Member States' work in the area of youth policy. So the Framework decided to establish a special form of cooperation between the European Commission and Member States, whereby priorities are set in collaboration and progress towards these priorities is assessed jointly and openly. This is called the '**Open Method of Coordination**' (OMC), and it forms the first strand of the Framework.

Under this OMC, the Member States will work towards **four priorities** for youth policy: “*participation*”, “*information*”, “*voluntary activities*” and “*a greater understanding and knowledge of youth*”. Throughout the process, young people’s views are sought and taken into account. Member States regularly follow their national practices and the Commission consults the European Youth Forum. This is particularly important, given that survey evidence reveals that only around four out of ten young Europeans feel that their voice counts in the European Union.²

The OMC thus ensures the exchange of best practices and innovative approaches among Member States, and is a process in which young people are closely involved.

The years ahead will be busy ones for the OMC, as reports will be compiled by the Commission in all four priority areas. The aim is for the Commission to present a Communication on youth policy which would be followed by a Council Resolution in November 2006. There are thus some important political milestones for youth policy ahead.

Taking into account the youth dimension in policy-making

The second strand of the Framework relates to the **youth dimension in other relevant policy areas**. Here, Member States were asked to take better account of the youth dimension in other relevant policies, such as education, employment or the fight against racism and xenophobia. In this context, the Commission supported so-called “pilot projects” on participation of young people in 2003-4.

New tools have been developed in the partnership between the Commission and the Council of Europe. For example, in May 2004 the Commission launched the new **European Youth Portal** (EYP, <http://europa.eu.int/youth>), which facilitates access to information on issues which are of interest to young people (such as education, volunteering, jobs etc.) and offers interactive discussion and participation tools.

There have also been notable efforts in the field of civic participation, also known as ‘**active citizenship**’. The civic participation of young Europeans is a major concern for policy makers across Europe. Surveys have shown that young Europeans are less likely to be interested in, or indeed feel well informed about, politics and current affairs than their older brethren. The elections for the European Parliament in 2004 revealed that only one third of people aged 18 to 24 voted. This compares to 45.6 percent for the voting population as a whole.

Similarly, the referenda in France and the Netherlands, which rejected the proposed Constitution, revealed that the highest proportion of those voting ‘no’ were among the young. Yet in the aftermath of the referenda, only nine percent of young people expressed the desire for a pause in the development of the European Union. On the contrary, a quarter of Europe’s youth is calling for a consolidation of existing political priorities, while almost half would like to see new developments, particularly in the field of welfare and prosperity of individuals.

In the months since the referenda, the EU institutions have paused to reflect, regroup and look ahead. This is the time for dialogue, debate and democracy—what we call our Plan D—and the involvement of Europe’s young people is an important part of it.

A consultation was launched on the Internet on the topic “Young people in Europe: Promoting Active Citizenship and Implementing the European Youth Pact”. The results of the

² http://europa.eu.int/comm/youth/youthweek/doc/2005/eurobarometer_en.pdf

consultation were presented during ‘European Youth Week’ organized in all Member States from 5 to 11 December 2005. In Brussels, a major conference took place under the slogan “Youth takes the Floor” where around 200 young people were given the opportunity to voice their expectations and concerns relating to the European Union.

The conference focused on three key issues:

- getting young people involved in the European project (Plan D)
- fighting unemployment and social exclusion (European Youth Pact)
- and promoting active participation (Active Citizenship)

The message they brought was clear: young Europeans wish to get involved, to be consulted and to have dialogue with political representatives at all levels, including the European level. They request that their national authorities engage in more debates with young people at all levels and in all policy areas. Electronic media were confirmed to be the preferred source of information for young Europeans when they seek political information. Finally, the young people challenged policy makers to better explain the link between EU youth policy and active citizenship and the role of voluntary activities.

Young Europeans Participate in the Political Process in New Ways

However, if young Europeans’ level of interest in politics is significantly lower than the average, this does not mean that young people are not ready to be politically involved. They seem to express their political involvement through means that differ from the classical approaches of turning out to vote or being a member of a political party.

This is why the European Commission is convinced that its programs in the field of youth and active citizenship offer the right mix of responses. These action programs, which grant funds to many varied types of projects, encourage the forms of civic participation that are already favored by the young. They include the *European Voluntary Service*, possibly the best-known initiative for bringing together youth and active citizenship through participation in charitable activities across Europe. This year, I am pleased that the European Voluntary Service celebrates its tenth anniversary, and the occasion shows that the EU is a long-term partner with the Member States in encouraging civic participation and volunteering among the young.

Participation in these European projects improves young Europeans’ understanding of their fellow European peers, and raises awareness of their European identity.

Widening the Youth Dimension

The inclusion of the youth dimension in other policies and programs received a major impulse through the adoption of the **European Pact for Youth** in spring 2005 by the Heads of State and Government. It is a contribution to the revised Lisbon strategy focusing on growth and jobs. The Pact recognizes that the Lisbon goals can only be achieved by involving the full potential of young Europeans. The Pact in particular refers to the three areas that are of particular concern to Europe’s young people: ‘*employment and social inclusion*’; ‘*education, training and mobility*’; and ‘*reconciling family life and working life*’.

The success of the Pact depends on the involvement of all; starting from youth organizations at national, regional and local level as well as the European Youth Forum.

Inter-Cultural Dialogue – A Top Priority for the Young

The preservation and the promotion of cultural diversity are matters that are enshrined in the Treaty, in Article 151, and in the Charter of the Fundamental Rights of the European Union, in Article 22. In short, these texts stipulate that the European Union shall respect cultural, religious and linguistic diversity.

These are aims that young Europeans readily identify with. When asked, more than half of Europe's young people (54.9 percent) place xenophobia and the fight against racism at the top of their list of political priorities. This is clearly an important matter in a continent with as much cultural diversity as ours. Cultural diversity is one of Europe's defining characteristics and also one of its greatest assets. The European Union is committed to preserving and promoting that diversity. The last 50 years of European integration are a testimony to the fact that it is possible to preserve and, indeed, benefit from that rich diversity while bringing together nations and peoples.

On May 2004, the diversity of the Union increased with the accession of ten new Member States. In 2007, when two more countries join, the total EU population will approach 500 million, representing an immense wealth of cultural, social and linguistic diversity. The combined effect of these successive enlargements of the Union, the increased mobility resulting from the single market, old and new migratory flows, more significant exchanges with the rest of the world through trade, education, leisure and globalization in general, is increasing interactions between European citizens, and all those living in the European Union, and the various cultures, languages, ethnic groups and religions in Europe and beyond.

Each individual EU Member State is responsible for its own cultural policies. Nevertheless, on the basis of the Treaty provisions mentioned above, the EU does have a responsibility to raise awareness of our common European heritage, to promote the diversity and richness of European cultures and to increase openness towards other cultures. Over time, the European Union has developed policies and instruments for doing so, including in the field of youth policy.

The next challenge will be to move on from preserving and promoting cultural diversity to the development of an intercultural dialogue. In an increasingly multi-cultural Europe, respect for shared values such as respect for human dignity, freedom, equality, solidarity, the principles of democracy and the rule of law as well as respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities shall be strengthened by promoting mutual understanding and dialogue between cultures.

Intercultural dialogue has always been at the core of the European integration project. But there is now an increasing awareness in Europe that we need an even deeper and more structured dialogue, involving public authorities and the civil society at large. This shift from "multi-cultural" to "inter-cultural" societies is a prominent feature of many of the EU's strategic priorities and it explains why the European Commission proposed, on October 2005, to make 2008 the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue.

The European year seeks to raise the visibility and importance of intercultural dialogue as a process to develop a better living together in the daily life within the EU. It is clearly connected to the development of an active European citizenship, which is open to the world, respects cultural diversity and is based on common values in the European Union. It aims at raising the awareness of all those living in the European Union, in particular young people, of

the importance of developing an active European citizenship which is open to the world, respects cultural diversity and is based on common values in the European Union.

This initiative is a unique awareness-raising tool, providing opportunities to strengthen the “mainstreaming” of intercultural dialogue in all relevant Community programs and increase their coherence.

Intercultural dialogue is relevant not only within the European Union but also in its relations with third countries. Candidate countries will be closely associated to the Year through their participation in the relevant EU programs as well as other initiatives promoting intercultural dialogue that will be developed within the appropriate frameworks of cooperation and dialogue (in particular within the framework of the dialogue between civil societies of the European Union and candidate countries). The Commission will also coordinate any relevant action to be developed with other third countries, in particular with countries of the Western Balkans as well as partner countries of the new European neighborhood policy.

To become involved, Europe’s youth need to be informed

To ensure the involvement of Europe’s young people, the European Commission is keen to make sure they are well-informed. Our *Eurodesk* network is a very important tool, since it is “a network at European level for informing young people and those who work with young people on European issues” via their national and regional information services (telephone, e-mail, or personal encounters). The Eurodesk network is financed under the YOUTH program, and the Commission closely monitors and coordinates the content of their work. The Commission participates in Eurodesk’s biannual network meetings and organizes a yearly meeting with the partners in Brussels. The Commission also regularly meets other information networks, such as the European Youth Information and Counseling Agency (ERYICA) and the European Youth Card Association (EYCA). These networks are important partners for the Commission in the area of youth information.

Questions are also asked via the European Youth Portal. The upkeep and administration of the EYP is undertaken by the *Eurodesk* network in cooperation with the Commission.

A Structured Dialogue with Young People

Since the adoption of the White paper on Youth, structured dialogue with young people is part of the regular activities of the European Commission. Stakeholders in youth issues are regularly represented at the national level by National Youth Councils and at the European level by the European Youth Forum (EYF).

The EYF is an umbrella non-governmental organization which is funded by the Commission. EYF is regularly informed and consulted on youth activities implemented by the Commission.

The “Youth takes the Floor” event in Brussels in December 2004 showed that young people wished dialogue to be further developed and structured, especially against the background of Plan D. The Commission is now exploring ways to do this with Member States in the framework of the current open coordination method, and more specifically within the forthcoming Communication that will be issued on “participation” and “information”. The decision to organize a European Youth Week regularly can be seen as a first response to the wishes of Europe’s young people.

The message for Europe's youth is simple: Europe needs young people and young people need Europe. Europe's economy needs young people because our populations are ageing fast. Europe's society needs young people because our democracies will work properly into the future only with their full participation. On the other hand, young people need Europe as well, because in this day and age our Union is the only means we have to harness the enormous potential of a knowledge-based and globalizing economy for the benefit of all. They need common Europe as a community of people and states based on peace and freedom, providing basis for more stability, security and prosperity.